



THE  
POLITICAL  
LIFE OF  
BLACK  
COMMUNIST

# LEFT OF KARL MARX

**CLAUDIA**

**JONES**

Carole Boyce Davies

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Preface	xiii
Chronology	xxiii
Introduction. Recovering the Radical Black Female Subject: Anti-Imperialism, Feminism, and Activism	i
1. Women's Rights/Workers' Rights/Anti-Imperialism: Challenging the Superexploitation of Black Working-Class Women	29
2. From "Half the World" to the Whole World: Journalism as Black Transnational Political Practice	69
3. Prison Blues: Literary Activism and a Poetry of Resistance	99
4. Deportation: The Other Politics of Diaspora, or "What is an ocean between us? We know how to build bridges."	131
5. Carnival and Diaspora: Caribbean Community, Happiness, and Activism	167
6. Piece Work/Peace Work: Self-Construction versus State Repression	191
Notes	239
Bibliography	275
Index	295



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One love! (What about the one love?!)

One heart! (What about the one heart?!)



## PREFACE

She made of her life a fury against poverty, bigotry, ignorance, prejudice, war, oppression—for all our sakes.

—RUBY DEE, *WEST INDIAN GAZETTE*, FEBRUARY 1965

Claudia Jones was a black woman and a communist, clear about her ideological orientation, as she was about her identity as a black woman writing and doing political work simultaneously. She saw her “activism through writing” as always linked to struggles for social change and for the creation of equitable societies. She also saw the implementation of Marxism-Leninism as a practical possibility, in the realization of a world in which resources were evenly distributed. But Claudia Jones also belonged to other traditions and communities, and she was willing to deploy all her positions in them. For her, the true creative fusion of these allied positions would be her major contribution to a distinctive anti-imperialist politics that positions her “left of Karl Marx.”

This book is not a biography but a study of someone who, in my estimation, is one of the most important black radical thinkers, activists, and organizers in African diaspora history. The need to reintroduce Claudia Jones and account for her in all relevant discourses essentially drives this project. I read Claudia Jones as a black feminist critic of Afro-Caribbean origin. As someone whose primary fields are literature and culture with an emphasis on black women’s writing, approaching the political life and intellectual corpus of Claudia Jones, I find a series of meanings immediately evident. Primary among them is that Jones was a black communist woman very conscious of

her location in history and of her contributions to advancing her particular understandings of anti-imperialism. But her Trinidadian origin, identity, and Caribbean diaspora belonging are also always ever present, as is her African diaspora experience, all gained through a series of migrations and lived experiences.

My relationship to Claudia Jones's life and work has been intensely personal yet, at the same time, deeply professional and political. First, I met by chance, in Birmingham (England),<sup>1</sup> Buzz Johnson, who had just published "*I Think of My Mother*": *Notes on the Life and Times of Claudia Jones*. He urged those of us beginning work on black women to find room for Claudia Jones in our teaching and studies. Still, a subsequent reading of his book did not provide as full a sense of the importance, the personality, and the politics of Claudia Jones as I have today, though her presence lingered somewhere in my consciousness and I used excerpts of her work in my teaching from time to time. I had other fleeting encounters with Jones's presence in sources such as Angela Davis's chapter on communist women in *Women Race and Class* (149–171) and Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe's *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, which had a few pages of material on Jones (136–140).

A few years later in 1992, I decided to visit Jones's gravesite in Highgate Cemetery one grey London day and joined a group tour through the older part of the cemetery. I soon discovered that Karl Marx's grave, my landmark to finding Claudia's, was in fact on the newer side of Highgate Cemetery. A quick escape from that tour and an individual pilgrimage to Karl Marx's gravesite found me in the presence of Claudia Jones's tombstone, a flat stone in the ground, to the left of Karl Marx's as one stands in front of the huge Marx bust. The significance of her position in death as it relates to the spatial/historical dimensions of both figures is overwhelming. The towering Marx bust, emblazoned with the words "Workers of the World Unite" is frequently visited and always strewn with flowers. Next to it is a simple flat stone, minus all the power and might of Marx, and easily overlooked by all visitors not knowing that there is a black woman "left of Marx." A black woman's history is again, literally, overlooked by many, even as she remains, forever, and definitively, "the black woman buried left of Karl Marx."<sup>2</sup>

So, gradually, Claudia Jones's presence has consistently enlarged itself in my life and work, as it has in the larger communities of knowledge. Clearly Jones is determined to be seen and heard again. Writing a paper entitled

“Black Feminist Thought: Dancing at the Borders” for the Black Feminist Seminar of the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1996), in which I critiqued the U.S.-centeredness of popular black feminist formulations, I decided, deliberately, to go to the work of Ella Baker and Claudia Jones as illustrations of black feminist politics that crossed the logic of U.S. borders. I soon realized that I had little material with which to work. I began in earnest then to engage in research on Claudia Jones. In the Schomburg Library and Cultural Center at the New York Public Library, and elsewhere, there was almost a total void. The Schomburg file on Claudia Jones contained only a few clippings from the *Daily Worker* and two encyclopedia entries, by Robin Kelley and John McClendon.<sup>3</sup> In all honesty, not much material was available on Ella Baker either, beyond the film *Fundi*; not much existed on Marvel Cooke and most of the other left women, who were, like Claudia, radical black female subjects.<sup>4</sup> This absence also confirmed a tendency that I began to recognize as the deporting of the radical black female subject to an elsewhere, outside the terms of “normal” African American intellectual discourse in the United States. So I was excited about the ongoing research on Ella Baker by Barbara Ransby,<sup>5</sup> as I was by that of Joy James on political prisoners and black female revolutionaries. What began as a brief interest has since developed into a much larger project, as the paucity of material itself created a huge space that needed to be filled.

The identification of a number of people still living, who had been comrades of Claudia Jones, many now aging and living in London, New York, and Chicago, opened up a major resource. I decided to work my way back, beginning with those who knew her last in London. In 1997, in between my responsibilities for the London semester abroad program of Binghamton University, I made significant advances in the London phase of my research. There was nothing in the British Museum and its public library, but the library in Brixton produced old microfilms of the *West Indian Gazette*, albeit with poor-quality machines for reading and printing them. Also in Brixton I walked through the streets and looked at the buildings near where the *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News* (as it was later called) was housed. In London, the library of the Institute of Race Relations, which publishes the journal *Race and Class*, was a rich find, in that it had several original copies of the *West Indian Gazette*, which I could look through and photocopy. Buzz Johnson promised to share what is apparently an extensive



collection of material, but he proved elusive, and his collection from all accounts is in storage at some unidentified place.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, the most fruitful source in developing a body of working material was the interviews<sup>7</sup> I conducted with people who knew Claudia Jones personally. Many showed me or handed me their own copies of newspapers, photographs, clippings, cards, letters, newsletters, and other archival material; they shared experiences and their own reminiscences, often provided missing pieces of information. Many were excited to meet me and learn that I had an interest in Claudia Jones; many were emotional, some still dealing with her loss. All were hospitable and offered repeated invitations to tea or lunch. Some, like Billy Strachan, who has since passed away and who was among the group of comrades who met her upon her arrival in London, wanted the interview to focus mostly on themselves, but even in these cases, the interviews provided quite a bit of contextual or relational material. Interviews and conversations with Pansy Jeffries and others who knew Jones personally produced details that fleshed out her human dimensions. (It was Barbara Castle, a member of Parliament in the Labour Party, who introduced Pansy Jeffries to Jones.) I learned that Jones was a helpful, sensitive person who could cook potatoes in five minutes. She liked having a nice coat, having her hair done, and looking good. She moved with a black, New York City style and tempo in the more formal London. Taking a taxi to get somewhere quickly was automatic for her, while other black Londoners tended to wait for the bus or tube. She was serious, intuitive, and nice without arrogance. She liked a good time. She was a human being who wanted to do what she could for black people, but she was not antiwhite. She developed the London Carnival, held in town halls before it moved to the streets. She saw beauty and talent contests and cultural programming as a way of bringing the black community out for carnival. She worked at all levels: with sympathetic whites, community workers, politicians, diplomatic representatives, musicians, entertainers, and writers and in schools and universities.<sup>8</sup>

A series of intellectual projects have begun to produce a body of scholarship on Claudia Jones. The proceedings of a symposium held in 1996 at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICS) in London, which brought together a number of her friends and colleagues, has been edited and introduced by Marika Sherwood with Colin Prescod and Donald Hinds (*Claudia Jones: A Life in Exile*). Another symposium on Claudia Jones was organized by Colin Palmer in 1999, at the Schomburg Library, and was videotaped. Speakers on

the panel included the now deceased Stretch Johnson, who was an intimate friend of Claudia, as well as George Lamming, Gerald Horne, Jan Carew, Lydia Lindsey, and this writer.

Significant encouragement and advancement of my research came from Lydia Lindsey, a historian at North Carolina Central University, who has been pursuing the intellectual history of Claudia Jones and working on a Jones biography for a number of years. Lydia was one of the first people to contact me about this project and to share information; she suggested we meet in Miami at the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) Conference. When we did meet (on a day when I had also talked with John Hope Franklin about his impending visit to Florida International University in Miami to give the Eric Williams Inaugural Lecture), we talked like old friends about someone we knew. Lindsey handed me a portion of her copy of the FBI files on Claudia Jones, and a few copies of Jones's "Half the World" columns from *The Daily Worker*, wondering if I had seen them.

A new body of literature on Claudia Jones is also emerging from a new generation of scholars. A copy of a dissertation by Claudia May at Berkeley,<sup>9</sup> which I was aware of, came to me through a colleague who knew I was working on Claudia Jones. It includes several interviews with comrades of Jones in New York. A master's thesis on Claudia Jones was written by Yumeris Morel in the History Department at Binghamton University. Additionally, Claudia Jones is one of four women studied in Erik McDuffie's two-volume Ph.D. dissertation for New York University. So a growing number of younger scholars interested in black intellectual traditions is reversing that erasure which her deportation meant to achieve, incorporating Claudia Jones in their dissertations and theses.<sup>10</sup>

This attention is beginning the process of recovering the radical black subject that was Claudia Jones from the oblivion that was intended by the United States government, and brings her back into our conscious knowledge. While she is relatively forgotten in the United States, in London there are organizations named after her and a proposal to have a statue in her honor in Notting Hill. The Camden Black Sisters have done an exhibition in her honor and produced a booklet in her name. The Claudia Jones Organisation in London maintains a series of activities and projects in her honor, including a Claudia Jones supplementary school.

All the evidence points to an energy, a spirit, a dynamism that always would

have resisted containment, erasure, or silencing. Through a number of encounters that could only be fortuitous, and exist in the very sphere of Caribbean “magic” realism, Claudia Jones is making it known that she wants to be heard. I have heard of other scholars pursuing a particular figure and feeling almost possessed by the subject of their study.<sup>11</sup> This has been my experience also, and I am a willing subject in this process. For one thing, Jones and I share a birthplace — Trinidad. We have made some of the same migratory journeys — to the United States and to London, though at different historical periods and with different results. In several interviews with people who knew and worked with Jones in London, there is always a moment when the interviewer, in describing her, stops and says, “She looked like . . . well, . . . very much like you do . . . about your height [some accounts put her at five foot, nine inches]. You share some of her bearing, behavior, Trinidadian style, mannerisms.” I am flattered, of course, because for me Claudia Jones was the kind of beautiful and insightful woman that I can only approximate. Still, all of my attempts to develop enough work for a study on her have moved with amazing fluidity.

Once, in Café Jam in Brixton, soon after my arrival in London in 1997, I sat with a group of friends<sup>12</sup> following a presentation at Goldsmith’s College. A tall, freckled man came in and sat in a corner of the café. After overhearing our conversation, he introduced himself to us. One of our group excitedly indicated that he was Ricky (Alrick) Cambridge, the founder of *The Black Liberator*<sup>13</sup> and someone absolutely essential to an understanding of black struggles in the United Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> I told him about my project and my inability to find material. To my absolute delight, he announced that he had been Claudia Jones’s last assistant up to her death and pointed me to a series of sources, indicating all the time that her papers must be somewhere in Hampstead, in the borough of Camden in northwest London. This was the most fortuitous of meetings, and I immediately scheduled an interview. We have since developed a friendship and worked on assembling a volume of Jones’s writings, tentatively titled *Claudia Jones beyond Containment*.<sup>15</sup>

Without a doubt, the most important of these experiences came after I had spent about six months in London, conducting interviews and tracking Claudia’s papers, all to no avail. During a last, brief, one-week visit to London after the *Presence Africaine* fiftieth anniversary conference in Paris (December 1997), at which I had presented a paper titled “Trans-cultural Black Intellec-

tual Presences,”<sup>16</sup> in which I had made a small mention of Claudia Jones, I received word from a London writer-friend<sup>17</sup> of a source who had her papers. I quickly pursued this lead and, two days later, with Ricky Cambridge facilitating the encounter, found myself in the living room of Diane Langford, in Hampstead. Diane Langford had been married to Claudia’s partner, Abhimanyu Manchanda, after Claudia’s passing. When Manchanda died, Langford and her daughter Claudia Manchanda (named in honor of Claudia Jones) inherited his estate, including his papers. Among the Manchanda papers, as Langford began to catalog them, was quite a bit of Claudia Jones material, that is, by all accounts, what remained after the Communist Party had come in and taken the first pick. Langford recounted that, throughout their marriage, Manchanda had retained, almost religiously, items such as clothing from Claudia Jones, which he would air out from time to time.

The room we entered in a house in Hampstead was dominated by a box and, deliberately arranged as though they were spilling out of it, were the papers, photographs, newspapers, poems, and letters that their curator, Diane Langford, had guarded with a passion. It is this first encounter with the box and its metaphors of containment and the spilling over of the contents of a life unwilling to be contained by limiting spaces that produced the title for the collection of Jones’s writings that Ricky Cambridge and I are editing.<sup>18</sup> Cambridge lamented the small amount of available material, when, in his memory, Claudia Jones had amassed a substantial collection of papers, books, and other items, the majority of which seemed to have disappeared.

That collection now resides in the Schomburg Library and is called the Claudia Jones Memorial Collection. This writer is pleased to have been the person who, with Alrick Cambridge, convinced Diane Langford that depositing the papers in the Schomburg, of all other options available, would make sure that Claudia came “home to Harlem.” I feel pleased that I was entrusted with bringing the collection to the United States and delivering it to the Schomburg.

But there are other intellectual homes to which Claudia Jones belongs: the black radical tradition; the Caribbean radical intellectual tradition, particularly the identification of Trinidadian scholars and activists who have contributed to world history in general; African American history and politics in the United States; African diaspora history; pan-Africanist politics; and feminist politics. All of these developing knowledges—that of black communists in

particular, which is still being written—are other homes to which Claudia Jones belongs. So I do not see her as “a woman alone”<sup>19</sup> but as an important member of a group of black women communists internationally; as a member of a cadre of African American communists in the United States; and as a respected member of and participant in the London Caribbean community.

*Left of Karl Marx* is a study organized around six chapters and an introduction. The introduction, “Recovering the Radical Black Female Subject: Anti-Imperialism, Feminism, and Activism” gives a general overview of the subject. Chapter 1, “Women’s Rights/Workers’ Rights/Anti-Imperialism: Challenging the Superexploitation of Black Working Women,” tries to account for the way Jones saw black working-class women as the representative subject for a range of allied political and economic positions. Chapter 2 is titled “From ‘Half the World’ to the World: Journalism as Black Transnational Political Practice” and concentrates on the range of Jones’s journalistic praxes. Chapter 3, “Prison Blues: Literary Activism and a Poetry of Resistance,” analyzes a group of fifteen poems found in the Jones collection. Chapter 4, “Deportation: The Other Politics of Diaspora, or ‘What is an ocean between us? We know how to build bridges,’ ” details Jones’s deportation and the criminalizing of communism that targeted Claudia Jones as a foreign national but which she transformed into another site of work. Chapter 5 is titled “Carnival and Diaspora: Caribbean Community, Happiness, and Activism” and details Jones’s work in the London Caribbean community. By way of a tentative closure, Chapter 6, “Piece Work/ Peace Work: Self-articulation versus State Repression,” studies the politics of life writing as it applies to political activism. In that chapter, I examine Claudia Jones’s own self-construction in relation to the state’s narrative. It identifies Jones’s FBI file as the final framing mechanism of the state when it made its case for criminalizing her for being a thinking, writing, speaking black woman.

Claudia Jones, as I have already noted, is interred to the left of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, London. In the general area of the Marx tomb are graves of several other communists, in what seems to be a decisively communism/arts/journalism corner of the cemetery. Across from Claudia Jones is Carmen England, a sister Caribbean friend and cultural worker. Caribbean journalists and world communist activists are identified on several tombstones close by.

As I left Highgate Cemetery after my December 2004 visit there with my daughter Jonelle, who was photographing the grave site, the realization that Claudia Jones was in the company she would have wanted came over me and provided an amazing lift.

As I come to the end of this stage of my work on Claudia Jones, I see many other possible beginnings. There is so much more to be said, but for now, there must be a reluctant and temporary closure. The photograph of Claudia Jones that you will find toward the end of this book (figure 31), shows her, I am sure, as she would want to be remembered. It portrays her happily attending as a guest the Caribbean-style wedding of Fitz Gore and Patricia Reid in September 1959. Her beautiful smile and joyful expression are mature echoes of another stunning and beautiful photograph, which graces the cover of the *Young Communist Review* (figure 3). This is the energy of Claudia that transcended all the pain she endured throughout her life and endeared her to many.



## CLAUDIA VERA CUMBERBATCH JONES

### *Chronology*

**T**his chronology uses dates from Claudia Jones's "Autobiographical History" and other sources that provide details about her public and private life. Exact dates of arrests, incarceration, and related matters are taken from official government documents available in the FBI's files under the heading: Claudia Jones/File number: 100-72390 Volume 1 and Volume 2. The ideological underpinnings of discrepancies between official and personal memory are the subject of the final chapter of this book.

- 1915 Born February 21, Belmont, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, to Charles Bertrand Cumberbatch and Sybil (Minnie Magdalene) Cumberbatch, née Logan.
- 1924 Arrives February 9 on S.S. *Voltaire* in New York City with sisters Lindsay, Irene, Sylvia and aunt Alice Glasgow.
- 1930–1935 Attends Wadleigh High School. Active in Junior NAACP. Studies drama at Urban League; performs in Harlem and Brooklyn.
- 1933 Mother dies of spinal meningitis at age thirty-seven, two years before Jones graduates from high school.
- 1934 Committed to Sea View Sanatorium for almost a year after having been diagnosed with tuberculosis.
- 1935 Graduates from high school. Works in laundry, factory, millinery, and sales.



- 1935–1936 Involved in Scottsboro Boys organizing. Writes “Claudia’s Comments” for a black newspaper; becomes editor of a youth paper, organ of Federated Youth Clubs of Harlem. Attends Harlem rallies.
- 1936 Joins Communist Party and Young Communist League; assigned to Youth Movement.
- 1937 Becomes Associate Editor of *Weekly Review* and Secretary of the Executive Committee of Young Communist League in Harlem. Employed in the business department of the *Daily Worker*. Attends six-month training school of the Communist Party.
- 1938 Becomes New York State Chair and National Council member of Young Communist League. Attends National Council of Negro Youth, Southern Negro Congress, National Negro Congress. Visits American Congress. Files preliminary papers for U.S. citizenship.
- 1940 Marries Abraham Scholnick.
- 1941 Becomes Educational Director of Young Communist League.
- 1942 Aggressive surveillance by FBI begins.
- 1943–1945 Becomes editor of *Spotlight*, American Youth for Democracy.
- 1943 Becomes Editor-in-Chief of *Weekly Review*.
- 1945–1946 Becomes Editor, Negro Affairs, *Daily Worker*. Elected full member of the National Committee of Communist Party USA at its annual convention.
- 1947–1952 Active in national women’s movements and United Front movements, such as Congress of American Women and National Council of Negro Women.
- 1947 Divorced in Mexico (February 27). Becomes Secretary, Women’s Commission, Communist Party USA.
- 1948 Arrested for first time (January 19); imprisoned on Ellis Island under 1918 Immigration Act. Released on \$1000 bail (January 20). Threatened with deportation to Trinidad (January 26). Speaks at May Day Rally in Los Angeles. Assigned by Party to work with working-class and black party women for peace and equality. Tours forty-three U.S. states, including the west coast, reorganizing state-level women’s commissions, recruiting new party members, and organizing mass

rallies. Deportation hearing begins but is postponed because people will not testify against her.

- 1950 Deportation hearing resumes (February 16). Appointed alternate member of the National Committee, Communist Party USA. Gives speech in March (“International Women’s Day and the Struggle for Peace”), which is later cited as “overt act” in her subsequent arrest. Arrested for second time (October 23) and held at Ellis Island under McCarran Act. Detained at New York City Women’s Prison (November 17). Released on bail (December 21). Deportation order served.
- 1951 Speaks in Harlem while on bail. Arrested for third time (June 29) under Smith Act, along with sixteen other communists (including Elizabeth Gurley Flynn). Released on \$20,000 bail (July 23, 1951). Deportation hearing continues.
- 1952–1953 Serves on National Peace Commission at end of Korean War.
- 1953 Convicted under Smith Act (January 21). Sentenced to one year and a day and \$200 fine. Suffers heart failure and is hospitalized for twenty-one days at the end of her trial. December, hospitalized again. Diagnosed with hypertensive cardiovascular disease.
- 1954 Becomes Editor of *Negro Affairs Quarterly*.
- 1955 Imprisoned in Women’s Penitentiary, Alderson, West Virginia (January 11). Released October 23 after numerous petitions for health reasons. Sentence commuted for “good behavior.” Stays with her father. Hospitalized at Mt. Sinai Hospital, following heart attack identified as exacerbated by conditions of imprisonment. Deportation ordered (December 5). Leaves for London on the *Queen Elizabeth* (December 9). December 22, Arrives in London, welcomed by friends and Communist Party members, including earlier communist deportees from the United States.
- 1956–1957 Becomes affiliated with Caribbean members of Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB); joins West Indian Forum and Committee on Racism and International Affairs. Works in various organizations in London, including the Caribbean Labour Congress (London Branch); reportedly helps with the editing of final issue of the Labour Congress’s organ, *Caribbean News*.

- 1956 Hospitalized in London for three months.
- 1957 Co-founds West Indian Workers and Students Association. Becomes active in variety of ways against racism, immigration restrictions, and oppression of Caribbean community in London, and apartheid South Africa.
- 1958 Founds *West Indian Gazette* (later, *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News*) in London.
- 1958–1964 Edits *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News*; active in political organizing of Caribbean, pan-African, and third world communities in London.
- 1959 First London Caribbean Carnival, St. Pancras Hall, London (January 30).
- 1961 Afro-Asian Caribbean Conference, organized in part by *West Indian Gazette*, leads to formation of Committee of Afro-Asian and Caribbean Organizations.
- 1962 Visits Soviet Union as guest of editors of *Soviet Women*. Visits school and studies developments in health care. Is hospitalized while in Soviet Union. Tours Leningrad, Moscow, and Sevastopol. Returns to London (November 21).
- 1963 Visits Soviet Union again as representative of Trinidad and Tobago to attend World Congress of Women. August, organizes with Committee of Afro-Asian and Caribbean Organizations a “Parallel March” on Washington to U.S. Embassy.
- 1964 Works with African National Congress to organize hunger strike against apartheid, to boycott South Africa, and for freedom of political prisoners such as Nelson Mandela. Participates in protests outside South African embassy in London. Speaks at rally with novelist George Lamming and others (April 12). Meets Martin Luther King Jr. in London on his way to Oslo to collect Nobel Peace Prize. Writes editorial about King’s visit in *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News* (it is her last editorial and is published posthumously). Gives speech in Japan as a delegate to 10th World Conference against Hydrogen and Atom Bombs. Serves as Vice Chair of the Conference Drafting Committee; proposes resolution in support of liberation struggles in the third world. Travels to China as guest

of China Peace Committee. Meets Chairman Mao, along with a Latin American delegation. Interviews Soong Ching Ling, wife of Sun Yat-Sen. Dies of heart failure in London.

- 1965 Funeral draws recognitions from governments around the world, diplomatic representations, and media coverage. January 9, Cremated at Golders Green Crematorium, London. Memorial meeting held in Peking by Committee of British and American Friends of Claudia Jones (February 21). Interment of Jones's ashes in plot to left of grave of Karl Marx, Highgate Cemetery, London (February 27).
- 1984 Headstone erected; inscription reads: "Claudia Vera Jones, Born Trinidad 1915, Died London 25.12.64, Valiant Fighter against racism and imperialism who dedicated her life to the progress of socialism and the liberation of her own black people."



## Introduction

### RECOVERING THE RADICAL BLACK FEMALE SUBJECT

*Anti-Imperialism, Feminism, and Activism*

Your Honor, there are a few things I wish to say! . . .

I say these things not with any idea that what I say will influence your sentence of me. For even with all the power your Honor holds, how can you decide to mete out justice for the only act [to] which I proudly plead guilty, and one, moreover, which by your own rulings constitutes no crime—that of holding Communist ideas; of being a member and officer of the Communist Party of the United States?

—CLAUDIA JONES, FROM “SPEECH TO THE COURT, FEBRUARY 2, 1953”

The only black woman among communists tried in the United States, sentenced for crimes against the state, incarcerated, and then deported, Claudia Jones seems to have simply disappeared from major consideration in a range of histories. The motivating questions for my study have arisen principally from this situation. How could someone who had lived in the United States from the age of eight, who had been so central to black and communist political organizing throughout the 1930s and 1940s, up to the mid-1950s, simply disappear? How could such a popular public figure, an active journalist and public speaker, a close friend of Paul and Eslanda Goode Robeson, a housemate of Lorraine Hansberry, mentored by W. E. B. Du Bois, remain outside of major consideration? How could someone who was so central to Caribbean diaspora community organizing abroad, the

founder of the London Carnival and of one of the first black newspapers in London, the *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, a close friend of Amy Ashwood Garvey, a female political and intellectual equivalent of C. L. R. James, remain outside the pool of knowledge of Caribbean intellectual history? The need to find answers to these questions, and thereby correct these omissions, provides the impetus for this book.

Tall, elegant, brilliant, and Trinidadian, Claudia Jones was deported from the United States in December 1955 after serving over nine months of a one-year-and-one-day sentence in the Federal Prison for Women in Alderson, West Virginia.<sup>1</sup> In my view, the deportation of Claudia Jones in a sense effected the deporting of the radical black female subject from U.S. political consciousness. By “radical black female subject,” I mean both this black radical individual herself and the basic subject or topic of black female radicalism within a range of political positions and academic histories. Claudia Jones’s politics were radical because she was seemingly fearless in her ability to link decolonization struggles internally and externally, and to challenge U.S. racism, gender subordination, class exploitation, and imperialist aggression simultaneously.

The fact that Claudia Jones is *buried* to the left of Marx in Highgate Cemetery, London, provides an apt metaphor for my assertions in this study. Her location in death continues to represent her ideological position while living: this black woman, articulating political positions that combine the theoretics of Marxism-Leninism and decolonization with a critique of class oppression, imperialist aggression, and gender subordination, is thus “left” of Karl Marx.<sup>2</sup>

Claudia Jones’s position on the “superexploitation of the black woman,” Marxist-Leninist in its formation, offered, for its time, the clearest analysis of the location of black women — not in essentialized, romantic, or homogenizing terms but practically, as located in U.S. and world economic hierarchies. It thereby advanced Marxist-Leninist positions beyond their apparent limitations. To develop her argument, Jones contended that if all workers are exploited because of the usurping of the surplus value of their labor, then black women — bereft of any kind of institutional mechanism to conquer this exploitation, and often assumed to have to work uncountable hours without recompense — live a life of superexploitation beyond what Marx had identified as the workers’ lot.



1. Claudia Jones, on left on second row, with other defendants in front of Court House, Foley Square, New York. Pettis Perry is on the far right in the second row. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn is to Claudia Jones's left. From the *West-Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, 1965.

Jones's argument regarding the superexploitation of the black woman is clearly a position left of Karl Marx, since Marx himself did not account for race and gender and/or the position of the black woman. Though her position may be identified as a logical extension of Marx's theory of surplus value, Marx had not, in his time, either the imagination or the historical context to argue for the gendered black subject. Lenin had taken a position on what was then called "the woman question," asserting from the outset that "we must create a powerful international women's movement, on a clear theoretical basis."<sup>3</sup> But Lenin spoke only of the enslavement of women within the social and economic structures that restrict them to domestic labor. Clearly this general position did not account for the specificities of any group of women, as it spoke of women generally and did not figure in the fact that black women at that time were already located in a superexploitative condition within the given productive labor sectors. This is the analytical space in which Claudia Jones began to provide intellectual leadership and to which subsequent scholars of black women's social and political history and condition in various societies would contribute.



This line of argument on the economics of black women's experience was to be made subsequently by Francis Beale in a 1970s black feminist articulation, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," but it somehow disappeared from Beale's larger conceptual framework, which in the end she reduced to the "double jeopardy" of race and gender. Angela Davis took the formulation further than double jeopardy, as she identified instead, in *Women, Race and Class*, a "triple jeopardy" that was consistent with Marxist/feminist politics. Davis obviously had been aware of Claudia Jones's existence and ideas (167–171). But in my view, largely because her information was sketchy at best, Davis was not able to give Claudia Jones the full conceptual emplacement in an international "women, race, and class" formulation that she deserved.<sup>4</sup> It is important to recognize nevertheless that Angela Davis herself, having been imprisoned, like Jones, for her communist political views and activism, also occupied—and continues to occupy—the pole of the radical black female subject in black feminist conceptualizing. Claudia Jones thus functioned for Davis as an earlier example of a communist woman's struggle against state repression, as well as an earlier recipient of the state's reprisals.

It remained standard practice, during the 1980s and 1990s, for U.S. African American feminist scholars to deliberately reduce much of their analysis to either a race and gender approach (later including sexuality) or a straight U.S. linear narrative.<sup>5</sup> While a domestic U.S. approach is appropriate for fleshing out the specifics of African American feminist political history in the United States, such a position remains bordered within the U.S. narrative of conquest and domination and thus accompanies the "deportation of the radical black female subject" to an elsewhere, outside the terms of the given U.S. discourse. For this reason as well, there tended to be a consistent deportation of class analysis also to this elsewhere, though there would be fairly frequent mention of class in a variety of formulations.

For Claudia Jones, deportation was not the end of her life. Instead, "elsewhere" became creative space and another geographical location for activism. As will be explored in subsequent chapters, after deportation, Claudia Jones's life was full of political organizing in London: the founding, writing for, and editing of a newspaper; the organizing of cultural activities such as the first Caribbean carnivals in London; and travel to China, Russia, and Japan. Her untimely death in December 1964, nine years after she had left the United States, brought an abrupt halt to a vibrant life, full of activity and energy.

Some writers, such as Buzz Johnson,<sup>6</sup> have argued that her incarceration and the harsh treatment she experienced in prison in the United States—the denial at times of appropriate medical care and diet—weakened her to the point that it is possible to contend that the U.S. government technically killed her. While this is an important and credible assertion, others who knew her well<sup>7</sup> say that Jones never rested, even with a heart condition, and constantly minimized how serious her health issues were, so much so that many of her London colleagues never knew that she was as close to death as she was.

An African diaspora framework, internationalist in orientation, embraces this radical black female subject and begins a process of relational work, combating the imposed erasure and silencing of Claudia Jones that was the final goal U.S. officials intended by her deportation. *Left of Karl Marx* has the explicit aim, then, of recovering the radical black subject that was Claudia Jones for a variety of relevant discourses; this recovery of Claudia Jones, the individual subject, reinstates a radical black female intellectual-activist position into a range of African diaspora, left history, and black feminist debates.

#### Combating the Erasure and Silencing of Claudia Jones

The life of Claude Vera Cumberbatch (as she is identified in her birth certificate) was one that consistently resisted containment within the limitations of space, of time, and place.<sup>8</sup> Her declared political identification as a communist of Marxist-Leninist orientation functioned for her as a large enough ideological positioning within which to address the many other subject locations she carried: black, woman, Caribbean-born, pan-Africanist, antiracist, anti-imperialist, feminist. However, it also simultaneously marked her—if we are to use Joy James’s distinctions—as minimally a black radical subject and maximally as revolutionary.<sup>9</sup> In my view, a “radical black subject” is one that constitutes itself as resisting the particular dominating disciplines, systems, and logics of a given context. The radical black subject, male or female, challenges the normalizing of state oppression, constructs an alternative discourse, and articulates these both theoretically and in practice. This is a resisting black subject . . . resisting dominating systems organized and enforced by states, organizations, and institutions in order to produce a complicit passive people and to maintain exploitative systems. The revolutionary subject works in a movement geared toward dismantling that oppressive status.

In the end, these distinctions, while useful, may still not mark a person for

the entire trajectory of her life, particularly since, for the revolutionary position to be effective, the individual act must be operational within some sort of revolutionary movement for social change. James herself concludes that “no metanarrative can map radical or ‘revolutionary’ black feminism, although the analyses of activist-intellectuals such as Ella Baker serve as outlines” (*Shadowboxing*, 79).

Another such outline would be the activist-intellectual work of Claudia Jones herself. Along with her organizing and intellectual work, her own resistance to the variety of organized attempts to silence her are worth recognizing. Her speech to the court, excerpted in the epigraph to this chapter, which begins “Your Honor, there are a few things that I wish to say,” challenges linguistically, politically, and legally the state’s illegal attempts to silence her. Indeed, she has her say, and this itself becomes a tangible document within the corpus of material on state censorship and the creation of political prisoners in the United States. Within the speech, she makes it clear that even the judge was hamstrung by the legal prescriptions against communism and confined by U.S. capitalist prescriptions about ideas. Jones became a political prisoner, imprisoned—as she herself says explicitly—for her independent ideas. Paramount in this imprisonment and subsequent deportation was the fact that she dared to adopt a political philosophy that was anathema in the McCarthy period of the 1940s and 1950s: Marxism-Leninism with an anti-racist, antisexist, problack community orientation.

Claudia Jones also has to be seen as a writer articulating her ideas in a variety of media (poetry, essays, articles, editorials, reviews, booklets). While her dominant genre was the political essay, the creative was clearly also part of her formation. Thus another form of resistance to silencing is her composition of a number of poems during periods of imprisonment, which also thereby demonstrated her resolve and willingness to speak in the face of perhaps the most concentrated and directed attack on her freedom and the notion of freedom more generally. Her subsequent founding of the *West Indian Gazette*, which opened up a wide space for free expression, also furthered this process and provided some continuity with her essays in *Political Affairs* and journalism in the *Daily Worker*. This conscious and deliberate definition of herself as a black woman writer is another major means by which she combated erasure and silencing, as it has been for numerous other discarded writers now being brought back into full consideration.